

Supernatural Sermon for OT 13, June 28, 2009
 1st Presbyterian Church, Bemidji, Minnesota
 Mark 5: 21-43

THE MAN AND THE MESSAGE

Some of you will remember the name of Dr. Albert Schweitzer; although it is not the household name now that it was 50 years ago. But by any measure he was one of the towering personalities of the 20th century. He was a pastor and preacher, a brilliant organist, a medical doctor and medical missionary in the heart of Africa. Above all he was a world-renowned humanitarian, which earned him the Nobel Peace Prize in 1957. The fact that as a pastor he decided to become a medical missionary is a clear sign of his own interpretation of Jesus' mission and message.

He wrote many books, but his most important one, the one by which he is best remembered, was called, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. The book was Schweitzer's attempt to discover the character and personality of the human Jesus, who walked the rocky paths of Palestine, who proclaimed the coming kingdom of God, who taught and healed, and drew all manner of men and women to himself, and who did those things before the events of his death and resurrection revealed him to the world as God With Us.

Schweitzer recognized that everything we read about Jesus in the Bible was written after the resurrection, -- written by the Gospel writers who knew that he was not just Jesus of Nazareth, but Jesus the Christ; and all that they say about Jesus is filtered through the hindsight of the resurrection.

Suppose that we didn't know that Jesus had been crucified, died, buried and rose again. Put yourself in the position of those who knew him only as Jesus of Nazareth, the ones who did not know "the rest of the story." What are the clues to his entirely unique personality? What was the quality -- the vital force in him that drew people to him in such numbers and in such a diversity? What, really, was this man like? And what was he committed to as his own work, his own avenue of ministry?

Jesus answered the question about his agenda when messengers came to him from John the Baptist, asking him what his business was. He answered, "Go tell John simply what you have seen and heard, the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, and the ones who need it have the Good News proclaimed to them. (*Luke 11:5*) In effect, Jesus was saying that the healing of bodies and the proclamation of the good news of God's kingdom belong together. That was Albert Schweitzer's insight.

Jesus was not about to deny the worth of physical human life. And he would in no way suggest -- as some of his followers have - that the quality of earthly life in all of its dimensions ought to be disregarded in favor of things spiritual.

These are stories about Jesus' power to heal. They are poignantly tender human encounters; and they open up an intimate insight into Jesus' warm sensitivity and even painful sympathy with the human condition. They were signs of his own vital force and his attitude toward the importance and quality of life itself.

Consider Jarius: A man of great authority in his community, a man who had access to any available human resource, but coming to Jesus for help only as a father, desperately fearful for the life of his beloved young daughter. How many parents have known that feeling, perhaps in the night time dimness and muted, purposeful rustlings of some hospital intensive care unit? Jarius, perhaps the most important person in his community, in the depth of his need and in the presence of that mysterious power, surrendered all of his prestige, all of his authority, and became only the helpless parent of a critically sick child.

And the daughter: twelve years old, certified dead by all who stood at the bedside. Jesus spoke to her as one would speak to a child, like a good pediatrician, using words she would understand and that would reassure both her and the parents. *Talitha kum*, "Little one, get up." And then there is that wonderful touch at the end, when Jesus, the physician, turns to the family as a kind of afterthought and says, "Oh yes, and get her something to eat." -- that marvelous sensitivity to the most basic of human needs.

And then there was the woman: She had a chronic condition that was not only physically distressful but one that made her an outcast among her people. She was an untouchable, one who could neither touch or be touched. She took an immense risk. She stepped beyond all of the religious and cultural boundaries of her community. She dared to reach out and touch the back of Jesus' clothing a shocking act within her religious and cultural system. And without any word or act on Jesus' part, she was healed -- literally behind his back.

Here is the great mystery of Jesus' vital spiritual force and power. Jesus could feel that force as flowing from him like an electric current. The ones around him could sense that as a force and a power almost physical in its impact. And they interpreted that as the spirit of God working in and through him. Without seeing, Jesus sensed that someone, somehow, had tapped into that power, and he turned and he knew who had done it. And she came in trembling fear, because of what she had dared to do. And he said, "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace."

What this tells me -- and I hope, you -- is that Jesus' healing work needed the ones who would benefit from that work to bring to bring something of their own to the relationship. To the woman, he said, "Your faith has healed you." In both of these cases the people brought only their faith and their naked need. They brought no expectations, only their faith and their need, and that was sufficient. That was enough.

All of this leaves a lot of large questions that you will need to process for yourselves. The more urgent question is, What about us? There is no visible, physical Jesus to whom we can take even our most desperate needs. Does that mean that God in his love and benevolence has committed our physical well-being to the medical science, a skill and a science that is certainly among God's many gifts and blessings? If we believe that God heals today with the same spiritual power that flowed through Jesus, is it then a forced choice between what some think of as faith healing alone or a reliance on scientific medicine? There are those who think it is, and there is recent evidence of that in Minnesota news -- with a court making the final determination.

I would rather regard it, not as a forced choice, but as a partnership. And I know from my own acquaintanceships that there are many physicians who feel exactly that way. Why else would we pray for ourselves and our sick and dying friends if we did not believe that the healing power of that same Jesus flows through our prayers as well as through the ministry of skilled and dedicated doctors. And as we pray for those we know in person, we need also to pray for those who for one reason or another, economic or geographic, are beyond the help of the medical care that we ourselves enjoy.

It is a job for the church. Nearing the end of his life, Jesus commissioned his followers in almost the same words as he had used to describe his own work: "Proclaim the Good News, Heal the sick." That is the commission we have inherited and which we carry to our own world and time. Jesus means something to our world because a mighty spiritual force streams out of him and flows through our time also. That is the message of his resurrection, and that is the solid foundation of our Christian faith.

Notes Borg

He was a remarkable healer: more healing stories are told about him than about anybody else in the Jewish tradition. He attracted a following, including people who left their previous lives behind, and any sketch of Jesus with a claim to historical credibility, must account for this fact. There must have been something quite compelling about him. He also attracted enemies, especially among the rich and powerful.

According to some of the stories in the gospels, his followers experienced a presence around him that was palpable and contagious. . . . Jesus was both a healer and an exorcist. Modern scholars generally accept that there is a historical core to the healing and exorcism stories, even though we may not be confident that any particular story is a detailed report of a specific incident. But historically speaking, we can say that Jesus was perceived by his contemporaries and himself as an exorcist who cast demons out of people and as a healer of diseases, and that this was attributed to the power of the Spirit working through him.

(Parable of the good Samaritan). . . Contact with death was a source of major impurity; and the wounded man is described as “half dead,” suggesting that one couldn’t tell whether he was dead without coming close enough to incur impurity if he was. Thus this beloved and often domesticated parable was originally a pointed attack on the purity system and an advocacy of another way: compassion.

The stories of his healings shatter the purity boundaries of his social world. He touched lepers and hemorrhaging women.